

AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION ISSUES IN SALAMI-AGUNLOYE'S *MORE THAN DANCING*

AGBOOLA, Michael Olanrewaju

Department of Performing Arts, Kwara State University,
Malete, Kwara State, Nigeria

lanreagboola99@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study examines the issue of gender and political participation in Nigerian drama, using Irene Salami-Agunloye's *More than Dancing* as a paradigm. The content analysis methodology is adopted to examine the subject of this play. This is used in addition to references to published books, journal articles, unpublished theses, internet materials and other media sources. The study discovers that the festering issue of patriarchy, though a global phenomenon, is more profound in African politics, Nigeria inclusive. Also, Nigerian dramatists since the nation's independence often caste Nigerian women in various relegated forms of identity until recently where women dramatists themselves have started to launder their own image through their cultural productions. It has equally been observed that, the signifying agency of African women in terms of political acumen, intelligence and productivity is just as strong as that of their male counterparts. It has, therefore, been concluded that, though the political space stifles women in terms of participation, it is possible to reverse such trend, as emblematic of the denouement of the play which turns out to favour greater involvement of women in politics and exertion of the agency of women. However, attainment of this will require aggressive advocacy.

Key Words: Gender; Political, Participation; Representation; Patriarchy

Introduction

The issues of gender and politics are, arguably, as old as the first sets of organised human societies, like the city state, which Aristotle refers to as a *polis* (Udokang and Awofeso, 2001: 11). Historical evidences, both in ancient and modern times, support the idea of male dominance over their female counterparts in many spheres of life, and politics is major. Most scholars on gender and politics seem to agree on this. For instance, in Ancient Rome, an adulterous wife could be killed by her husband without trial, while the reverse attracted no punishment on the man (Keiefer, in Awofeso and Odeyemi, 2014: 104). Women's virginity is considered in pre-historic culture as exclusively "part of the personal estate of their husbands" (Izugbara, 2013: 283) and the absence of it attracted severe punishment; while "Nigerian communities approve such practices as preference for male child" (Enemu, 1999: 230). From independence to date, Awofeso and Odeyemi (2014: 105), argue that the Nigerian political space has been characterised by patriarchy, which in the words of Heywood (2007), in Awofeso and Odeyemi (2014: 105), generally connotes, "the rule by men". Drama and theatre too; seem to have taken cognizance of this as they address the subject in various ways. While men and women are portrayed in African drama from different perspectives as participating in politics, the numerical strength, depth of influence, importance, impact, and political significance, particularly from the postcolonial period to date weigh heavily and negatively against women in Nigeria. This situation puts to question the level of participation of women in politics and also poses the direct question: How participatory?

In pre-colonial Nigeria, women were active in the political administration of their domains. A number of them are known to have occupied important political positions and played significant political roles. Some were high ranking chiefs, war generals, chief priests, and even the political heads of their communities or kingdoms such as Queen Amina of Zazzau, Iyayun and Luwo who became the Alaafin of Oyo and Ooni of Ife respectively. However, with the advent of the Europeans to Africa; there seems to have been a change in the active involvement of women in the politics of the continent/domains, amongst many other things. Awofeso and Odeyemi (2014: 105) note that, two major colonial policies helped to promote patriarchy in Nigeria. They are, the educational policies that were skewed against women, and the restructuring of the African traditional economy that favoured the males against their female folk. Women representation in the three tiers of government since 1960 to late 1990 has been noted to be as low as two percent (Udegbe, 1998, in Awofeso and Odeyemi, 2014: 105). Even still, it is not hasty for one to claim that, the post-military political space has not recorded any significant improvement in women participation either as Quadri (2015: 1) argues that whatever improvement recorded in this area is marginal.

A lot of socio-cultural prejudices still constitute inhibition to women participation in politics compared to their men folk. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to examine this persistent issue of gender imbalance

in the political administration of Nigeria as reflected in the drama, particularly through *More than Dancing* by Irene Salami-Agunloye, (2013). The content analysis methodology is adopted to examine the subject of this drama in this article.

Political participation in this paper refers to the various variables of political involvement with the representation that goes along with it. The paper attempts to answer the following research questions: What is the peculiar nature of Nigerian politics? What are the inhibitions to women ascendancy to limelight in Nigerian politics? Are women truly marginalized in the political administration of Nigeria? If they are, how can women participation be improved or increased, in concrete terms, in politics?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Walker's Womanism, a post-feminist theory that started with the black women movements in 1970s in the United States of America. It emanated in response to feminism, which though championing the crusade for women's equality with men in terms of rights yet discriminated against black women. The African American, Walker, first advanced this theory in her book: *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden: Womanist Prose* (1983) and the same has been modified and domesticated by African feminist advocates and scholars, such as Ogunyemi (1988), and Kolawole (1997). Dasylva (2017: 11) actually notes this modification when he states that, "this is what the African feminists, including M.E.M. Kolawole, did to Western feminism". Asen (2006: 173-174) observes:

Womanism is a women-centered theory meant to highlight peculiar gender issues in Africa and Africans in Diaspora. It ensures that gender issues are presented without jeopardizing the womanly values of the black community. These values include the male/female relationship, marriage, motherhood and the feminine personality. It also aims at enhancing the unity of black people worldwide (Pp. 173-174).

According to Walker's (2000: xi) definition, a "womanist" was/is "a black feminist or a feminist of color". Womanism provides an avenue to foster strong relationships between black women and black men. The womanist is someone who is "committed to survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female" (Walker, 2000: xi). Womanism identifies and critically analyses sexism, anti-black racism, and their intersection. It "seeks connections and solidarity with black men" (Napikoski, 2016). The term "womanist" is thus both an alternative to and an expansion of the term "feminist." To further make it more relevant to the African society, Ogunyemi, in Asen, (2006: 179), argues that, there are peculiar areas of African issues which blacks in America cannot deal with which the theory needs to accommodate. She identifies these as "extreme poverty, and in-law problems, such as ... men oppressing their wives". In terms of its features, while womanism, like feminism, advocates for freedom of women and equality with the men folk it does so much less radically, and constructively, than feminism. In doing so, it puts into consideration the sanctity and wellness of the society and seeks cooperation with the men in lifting the female condition without disrupting the essence of the society. The reason is that, it is "interested in grown up doings; acting grown up; being grown up... responsible, in charge, serious" (Walker, 2000: xi).

Idowu, (2014) notes:

"womanism seeks to promote social justice, commonwealth and healing attributes in the society and larger context of the nation". It stresses complementarity between the genders and does not recognise a privilege of the male over the female: only in working together can both genders create harmony and justice in the society".

Sundry reasons account for African women's preference for the term womanism as opposed to feminism or black feminism. Womanism brings a "racialized and often class-located experience to the gendered experience suggested by feminism. It also reflects a link with history that includes African cultural heritage, enslavement, women's culture and a kinship with other women, especially women of color" (Asen, 2006: 174). Other reasons include, the need to establish identifiable and separate discursive traditions in order to give voice to the experience of ordinary black and other women (Seldomtin, in Asen, 2006: 174) and the gross inappropriateness of western feminism for the black woman because of its identification with a predominantly white movement (Kolawole, 1997: 11).

However, one weakness of Womanism, according to Ogunidipe, (2007: 10) is that there may not have been too clear-cut a difference between the aims of womanism as stated by their most eloquent theorists and feminism, because to her, "the ideology of womanism is still fully located in the ideology of patriarchy and the status quo for women in Africa". Notwithstanding, there is the general belief by gender scholars that womanist criticism is a term that will correctly reflect the situation of the African and that of the other Diaspora black woman than feminism (Mezu, in Asen, 2006: 175). This may have been so because of the

reasons adduced above which portray feminism as too radical to be suitable for the African environment, which holds family hood in high esteem.

Literature Review

Gender and Political Participation in Nigeria's Pre-colonial Drama

Taking a historical look at the issue of Nigerian political process and gender participation in African literature, the pre-colonial period may present an interesting picture. Although it is generally agreed among scholars, particularly socio-political scientists, culture scholars and critics, such as Ekwierhoma (2002), Ogunipe (2007), Awofeso and Odeyemi (2014) and Oluyemi (2015) that, the African society is highly patriarchal, it is nonetheless their common position that: the pre-colonial period may have produced strong female political activists and political leaders than any other period till date. Notable ancient towns like Ife, Oyo and Akure in the South-western part, Bony in the Niger Delta area, and Zazzau and Daura in the North are known to have produced female political figures that ascended the highest political status of their communities at that time and made significant contributions to socio-economic and political development. Although, to the best of this author's knowledge, there doesn't seem to be any record of plays that were published by Nigerians during the pre-colonial period, nevertheless, the period provided profound conflicts and myths which some dramatists of the postcolonial period adopted in a bid to comment on contemporary socio-political problems in the crafting of plays that revolve around gender issues. These are dramatized in a number of historical plays such as Ogunyemi's *Queen Amina of Zazzau* (1999), which presents the account of the expansionist drive and the political authority exerted by the eponymous character, Queen Amina, in the Northern hemisphere of the present day Nigeria, precisely in Zaria axis.

Efunsetan Aniwura (1964), by Akinwumi Ishola, also dramatizes the larger-than-life figure of Efunsetan, the Iyalode of Ibadan, who was stupendously rich, politically influential and highly revered by nearly all men, including those in the political echelon of her time. The sacrificial political feats of Moremi have been documented by many scholars and have also been dramatized by early Nigerian dramatists such as Duro Ladipo in "Moremi Ajansoro" (1964), Femi Osofisan in *Morountodun* (1982) and recently in Segun Ajayi's *Moremi: The Courageous Queen* (2007). There are also a number of undocumented versions of *Moremi*, such as the one produced by Oyin Adejobi in the late 60s (Barber, 2000: 131, 451). Similarly, *Emotan* (2001), and *Idia: The Warrior Queen of Benin* (2008) by Irene Salami-Agunloye dramatize the political influence of Emotan and Idia in precolonial Benin kingdom. Oluyemi (2015: 3) describes Moremi and Emotan as "great amazons who displayed wonderful bravery and strength in the politics of Ife and Benin respectively..." Iyayun, Orompoto, Jomijomi and Jepojepo are also known women who presided as Alaafins at different times in Oyo before the advent of the Europeans (Ayabam, in Awofeso and Odeyemi, 2014: 106). Similar political achievements have been recorded by women in Katsina Emirate, Bony Kingdom in the present Eastern part of Nigeria and Akure in the South west of Nigeria.

Gender and Political Participation in Nigeria's Colonial Drama

The political hegemony of the colonial era stifled the potentials of Africans to aspire and attain high political positions (Awofeso and Odeyemi, 2014: 105). The balkanization of Africa in 1885 by the Europeans translated to a halt of every existing political apparatus of the natives, except those approved by the colonial masters, which in anyway could not operate without strict control by the instituted imperial governments. Women were no less affected by this colonial impediment. Agbalajobi's (2010: 76) observation is apt here: "their Western cultural notion of male superiority reflected in their relations with Nigerians". Assie-Lumumba (1996) in Awofeso and Odeyemi (2014: 105) hold two colonial policies accountable for diminished female participation in politics. One, the colonial masters considered "only men to be active in the public sphere and earn a living to support their families" and, the restructuring of the African traditional economies and their linkage with the international capitalist economic system gave men control over export crop resources and other merchandise activities. This colonial order, according to Agbalajobi (2010: 76) "made gender discrimination more pronounced".

Similarly, Oluyemi (2015: 5) notes that, "it was also only in 1950s that women in Southern Nigeria were given franchise" (the freedom to participate in politics) whereas their male counterparts had been allowed some level of political participation since 1922. Personalities like Herbert Macaulay, Hezekiah Oladipo Davies, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Samuel Akintola, Adesoji Aderemi (the Ooni of Ife), Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Sir Ahmadu Bello (the Sardauna of Sokoto), and Mallam Aminu Kano are few of the Nigerian men in active politics during the colonial period. At this time, the women's wing of most political parties possessed very little functional relevance and only three women were appointed into the House of Chiefs (Oluyemi, 2015: 5). These included, at that time, Chief (Mrs) Olufunmilayo RansomeKuti (Western Nigeria House of Chiefs); Chiefs Margaret Ekpo and Janet Mokelu (Eastern Nigeria House of Chiefs). Although a number of Nigerian plays such as *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1985), by Ola Rotimi, *Attah Igala the Great* (2008), by Emmy Idegu, *Ameh Oboni the Great* (2005), and *Attahiru* (1999), by Ahmed Yerima, dramatize

the political insurrection of the natives against colonial hegemony, very few plays dramatize the female personalities' resistance against colonial domination, and their determination to rise to economic and political prominence. One that comes to mind is *Madam Tinubu: The Terror in Lagos* (1998), by Akinwumi Isola. Most of the plays that were staged during the colonial period were centered on nationalist struggle, based on improvisation, and are largely unpublished. They include, among others, "The Tiger's Empire" (1946), "Strike and Hunger" (1946), "Towards Liberty" (1947), and "Bread and Bullet" (1950) - all by Hubert Ogunde.

Gender and Political Participation in Nigeria's Postcolonial Drama

Nigeria's flag independence supposedly granted the indigenous writers the needed liberty to advance the course of the natives and in whole the new nation. This was a groundswell of politics as the focus was to entrench the new "political" independence. However, scholars such as Ogundipe (2007), Okoronkwo-Chukwu (2013), and Udengwu (2015) have shown that the previous political dispensations in African sub-Saharan areas were and still appear to be highly patriarchal. This is, however, not peculiar to Africa, as Udengwu (2015: 314) rightly observes that, "the absence of women in politics is a global phenomenon that has been taken for granted as a gender norm". For instance, in the United States of America, the emergence of the first woman in politics, according to Burrell, in Udengwu (2015: 314), was in 1922 when Rebecca Felton became a member of the Senate. She was not really elected but appointed by the then governor of Georgia to complete the term of the incumbent Senator, who passed away in 1922. Between that time and now, women in America have graduated from that token trend to what Burrell refers to as "strategic, ambitious, skilled, resourceful and experienced professional politicians who run for a seat in the national legislature when the political opportunity presents itself" (cited in Udengwu 2015: 315).

Although the feminist awakening publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's, (1892) *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* inspired many female writers to use their works for revolutionary advancement of the course of women, African female playwrights did not catch the fire until recently in the 20th century. Although many plays bearing political themes have been written by Nigerian playwrights, many of them are authored by men, and women writers believe that the representation of female identities in literature produced by men cannot rightly and sufficiently capture their true identity; neither can it be an objective and correct reflection of women's interests, pains and aspirations.

A few examples of early postcolonial plays with political themes include *A Dance of the Forests* (1963), *Kongi's Harvest* (1965), and *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), all by Wole Soyinka; *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* by Ola Rotimi (1977), and *The Raft* (1964), by John Pepper Clark. All of these have men as their protagonists and women are also not cast in complementary images in them. Rather, they are portrayed in low esteem, and as second fiddles. While *A Dance of the Forests* dramatizes the greed and inordinate ambition of political elite of a newly independent nation, *Madmen and Specialists* presents the unreasonableness of men in a theatre of avoidable war. *Kongi's Harvest* dramatizes the despotism and power struggle within the political classes in Nigeria. *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* centres on the despicable excesses of political figures and the condemnable ways in which they treat their wives. *The Raft* allegorically dramatizes the precipice on which the young Nigeria was threading due to ethnocentric, directionless and corruption-laden political elite. In all these, there is no woman that plays any politically significant role. Instead, women are either wives or abused wives for that matter; either mothers or daughters, either attendants or stewards. This is what Oloruntoba-Oju and Oloruntoba-Oju (2013: 6) describes as the "essentialist construction of African women" akin to the Eurocentric imaging of African women, for which they castigate Senghor as unwittingly reinforcing, in his bid to carve a new image for the same women. They explain:

The point here is that, the body image and social classification of the African female in both the colonial narratives and the African narratives of the Senghorian and Négritude tradition entailed the sole identification of *women* with essentially biological, or sex-related roles. It is this essentialism that legitimizes the notion that the Senghorian tradition indeed represents a further, albeit ironic, continuation of colonial essentialist constructions of the identity of the African female" (P. 6).

Among the three characters on the drifting raft in *The Raft* (1964), there is not a single female, and since the raft represents the new Nigeria, that dramaturgy appears to insinuate that women didn't exist in the country, politically. If the men on the raft symbolize the then existing regions, then women should be part of that humanity; this also further reinforces the patriarchal nature of Nigerian politics. To say the least, the political picture obtainable in the nation at that time conformed perfectly with the dramatic cannons of the same period. For instance, between 1960, when Nigeria gained her independence from Britain, and 1966 before the first military coup, in spite of the elaborate political activities that spread across the land only

four women were known to be elected into political offices (Oluyemi, 2015: 5). These were, Mrs. Wuraola Esan (Federal Parliament, 1960), Chief (Mrs.) Margaret Ekpo (Eastern Nigerian House of Assembly, 1961), Mrs. Janet M. Mokelu and Miss Ekpo A. Young (also Eastern House of Assembly, 1961-1966). Though very little achievement, it was, however, better than what obtained in the colonial period where women were not given political franchise that could allow them to be voted for (Oluyemi, 2015: 5). However, in Northern Nigeria, despite independence, women were still denied franchise until 1979 when the second republic was born.

The military eras of 1966-1979, and 1983-1999 gave no noticeable opportunities to women with political aspirations. All Governors/Administrators were males as well as nearly all state commissioners. However, in 1983, the Federal Government, headed by Gen. Muhammadu Buhari, introduced the first formal quota system regarding the appointment of women into political positions. Every Governor was mandated to appoint at least one female commissioner into the State Executive Council, and Oluyemi (2015: 6) observes that all states complied. In early 1990, during the regime of Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, Alhaja Latifat Okunu of Lagos State and Mrs. Pamela Sadauki of Kaduna State, were appointed Deputy Governors, but there were no female ministers and no female members of the Supreme Military Council (later renamed Armed Forces Ruling Council), which ran the affairs of the nation at the time. The unacceptable dictatorship of military regimes influenced many Nigerian playwrights of the period to write plays that castigated the draconian activities of the governments. Examples include Bode Sowande's *The Night Before* and *Farewell to Babylon* (1979); Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* (1984) and Osofisan's *A Restless Run of Locusts* (1976), *The Chattering and the Song* (1977) and *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980), but no female character is centrally positioned to bring about a political transformation or contribute to socio-political development in any of these plays, except for Titubi in *Morountodun* (1982), by Osofisan.

The participation of women in the politics of the Second Republic (1979-1983) recorded a little lift. More women won elections into both the Federal House of Representatives and the State Houses of Assemblies, but only two women - Chief (Mrs.) Janet Akinrinade and Mrs Adenike Ebun Oyagbola - were appointed Federal Minister for Internal Affairs and Minister for National Planning respectively (Oluyemi, 2015: 5). In the Third Republic, there were two female Deputy Governors - Alhaja Sinatu Ojikutu of Lagos State and Mrs. Cecilia Ekpeyong of Cross River State. Mrs. Kofoworola Burknor-Akerele, and Mrs Ita Giwa became Senator and Federal House of Assembly member respectively, in 1992.

The return of democracy on May 29th, 1999, provided hope for increase in women participation in Nigerian politics. However, available statistics show that though there was an increase, it was very marginal. For instance, of the eighteen years of democratic rule already recorded in this Fourth Republic, no female has emerged President and Vice President at the Federal level, nor a Governor at the state level. The situation is not too different at the Senate and Federal House for the same period. Both have been dominated by men. In 1999, there were only 3 women out of 109 Senators, representing (2.8%); in 2007, it increased to 8 (7.3%); in 2011, 7 (6.4%); and 8 (7.3%) again in 2015. For the House of Representatives, the figure stood at 12 women out of 360 members in 1999 (3.3%); 21 in 2007 (5.8%); 26 in 2011 (7.2%); and 14 in 2015 (5.3%) (Nigerian Centenary Country Report on Women, 2013).

The current representation of men and women in the following elective positions (2015 election) in Nigeria - President, Vice President, Senator, House of Representatives, Governors, Deputy Governors, and House of Assembly - is one thousand, five hundred and thirty-three (1,533). Out of this figure, only twenty-six (26) are women (Akpan, 2015: 20). If we go by the population of Nigerian women, which oscillates between 49.5% and 50% (Federal Bureau of Statistics, 2016 Statistical Report), this representation is extremely incommensurate with the high participation of women in politics.

According to Akpan (2015: 19), "political violence, money and *godfatherism*, as well as the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society cannot be ruled out" as hindrances to good performance by women. Akande-Adeola (2013: 10) too point out an impediment like scheduling political meetings for ungodly hours in order to "exclude as many women politicians as possible". Okoronkwo-Chukwu (2013: 42) also argues that, "this attitude of the society creates a sense of apathy in the women and explains the reason why they are more comfortable as voters, mobilizers, praise singers and supporters to male candidates". Government, therefore, needs more institutional frameworks to ensure female representation in politics and to implement the various international instruments that exert the political rights of women.

The huge amount of money that is employed in election campaigns in Nigeria also constitutes a kind of inhibition to women politicians as many of them cannot afford such amount to prosecute political participation, especially where everything has been skewed to favour the men, including diverting resources to them through the numerous positions they have held. This economic inequality, including ideological indoctrination, is what Millet (in Asen, 2006: 169) describes as sexual politics. For instance, interviews conducted by Olorunmola (2016: 9-10) with former Nigerian parliamentarians reveal that, "the

majority of interviewees were of the opinion that candidates aspiring to be federal Member of Parliaments (MPs) will have to expend as much as N200 million on election campaigns, and several billions by the presidential candidates.

This male-dominated political environment, which also reflects the cultural production of Nigerian writers, who are mostly men until recently, has begun to receive critical response from Nigerian women critics and playwrights. Chapman (1993), in Agbalajobi (2010: 76) observed:

“Men are the major determinants of political actions and inactions generally concerned with the perpetuation of power of the state...when women compete with men ... for political power, they do so on the terms already established by men” (P. 76).

That may account for why a critic like Ogunyemi (in Oloruntoba-Oju and Oloruntoba-Oju, 2013: 8) describes Nigerian literature as, ‘male’, or as ‘phallic’, largely entailing what Asha Sen also describes as “the immobilization of the female in male imposed traditionally-convened roles” (in Oloruntoba-Oju and Oloruntoba-Oju, 2013: 8).

Nigerian female playwrights registered their first dramatic imprint through Zulu Sofola, described by Obafemi (2006: 159) as one of the first generation of Nigerian dramatists of English expression. She was the foremost Nigeria female dramatist and first published playwright, who broke the jinx to become the first dramatist in the scene occupied by the male gender (Yacim, 2015: 189). Although Sofola wrote many plays – *The Deer Hunter and the Hunter’s Pearl* (1969), *The Disturbed Peace of Christmas* (1971), *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972), *King Emene* (1974), *The Wizard of Law* (1975), *The Sweet Trap* (1977), *Old Wines are Tasty* (1981) *Memories in the Moonlight* (1986) *Lost Dreams and other plays* (1992), and *Songs of a Maiden* (1992), and her television productions, *The Operators* (1973), and *Queen Omu-Ako Oligbo* (1989) - none of which is overtly political, except say for *King Emene* and in it, male characters are given commanding roles at the expense of the female. In reaction to growing influence of Western feminism on African literary works, Sofola, in 1998, wrote an article to reject the concept as many African women scholars (Amadiume, 1987; Aidoo, 1989) consider it too radical and inapplicable to the African society which holds womanhood and motherhood as important in the social relations of African culture. Sofola argues that, to divest African females of essential sex-determined features is to “dewomanise” and rob her of her African “identity” (in Oloruntoba-Oju and Oloruntoba-Oju, 2013: 11).

Other female playwrights who have written to criticise the stereotypical portrayal of women in male-dominated literature, and have evolved different dramaturgies in their bid to remodel the images of the female folk in the political trajectory of Nigerian state, especially from the late 1980s, include Tess Onwueme’s *The Desert Encroaches* (1985), *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), *Tell it to Women* (1995), *Then She Said it* (2003) and *What Mama Said* (2004); Chinyere Okafor’s *The Lion and the Iroko* (2002), Tracy Utoh’s *The Forest of Palm Trees*; Emotan, *Sweet Revenge*, *More than Dancing* and *Idia, the Warrior Queen* by Irene Salami-Agunloye, Stella Oyedepo’s *Burn the Fetters*, *Days of Woes*, *Beyond the Dark Tunnel*, and *Vigil for the Prisoner of Conscience*, and Osita Ezenwanebe’s *Giddy Festivals* (2009), including Julie Okoh’s *Edewede*. The main thrust of these plays, according to Udengwu (2015: 325-326) is “the unmasking of destructiveness and selfishness of male power”. The consensus opinion of the playwrights, she notes, “amount to a vote of no confidence on male leadership”.

It is apt at this stage to conduct an analysis of the play that have been chosen for the case study and see the approaches that are employed by the playwright to promote the image of women in politics and the signifiers employed to resonate the agency of the female gender in Nigerian politics.

Main Thrust: Gender and Political Participation in Irene Salami-Agunloye’s *More than Dancing*

It is time for general elections and a presidential candidate is supposed to emerge for the United People’s Liberation Party (UPLP). The male members of the political party take it as given that as usual, a male candidate will emerge. However, the women, led by Madam Bisi Adigun, would not brood relegation of women to the background this time as far as participation and representation is concerned. Rather than allow women to continue in the customary singing and dancing to promote the ambition of the men folk she rejects such appendage slot, sensitizes the women politically, and mobilizes them into a formidable front within the party. In spite of the massive opposition from the male members of the party, a woman candidate emerges and goes ahead to win as the president of the nation.

The dramatic device employed by Salami-Agunloye to highlight political under-representation of women presents women in this play as the underdog in a political contest that is supposed to be between equals. In other words, women are presented within the binary of “We” (men) as the signifier and “Others” (women) with a lower, insignificant and relegated agency. This binary of identity, which Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin condemn in their work, *The Empire Writes Back* (1998), especially in the political space, is what Salami-Agunloye makes the men of UPLP in *More than Dancing* guilty of. This is demonstrated from the

beginning of the play: "United People's Liberation Party's (UPLP) mini-convention is in progress. The men are gorgeously dressed and seated on the top rows while the women are seated on the lower rows" (stage direction, p.1). This sitting position symbolizes the gender relegation of women by men, a reflection of the binary mentioned above - men on top, women below. It equally symptomizes the patriarchy that permeates the African society and the overt prejudice against the women folk globally, but more rampant in African society. This sentiment runs through the play, with the women politicians being cast by their male counterparts in different models of identity that debase the female gender in politics, and Salami-Agunloye rejects all this by making the women fight back.

A number of such models of identity in the play are highlighted below. From the beginning, women are viewed by men as only fit for dancing to propel the men's ambition to attain political power (p. 1); **SANI** says to **ALIERO**, "You are not ripe enough to lead ..." (p. 3), "you" here refers to women in UPLP. In one of her comments, **NONA** complains: "They see the party as designed for men. Women are just filled in where needed. They see us as good only for dancing" (p. 9). Women are also seen by men as lacking the strength to participate in politics as can be deciphered from **JEGA's** warning to **MADAM BISI**: "Haba, Madam Bisi, be careful; don't push the women too hard. Political positions wear them out". Political positions with all their accompanying juicy appurtenances don't wear the male politicians out, only the women. Isn't that statement sinister? The strong aura of patriarchy that encumbers the society is seen by **NONA** as constituting the discrimination and exclusion women face in politics: "The idea that this is a man's world is very deeply entrenched in our society. Even though legislation may be passed, or public policy changed, you cannot change a man's mindset about women" (p. 10). Men perceive women as misfits in politics, and belonging to the kitchen, to cook for their husband. That is what **MADU** means when he says at the meeting held by men at the party's secretariat: "All women are good for is to dance at party rallies, not to rule! They have no place in politics! Not in African politics or decision-making process!" (p. 30), same for **SANI's** statement: "When America produces a female leader then Nigeria will be ready to produce one. Until then, tell **Prof. Nona Odaro** to go home and cook for her husband, period!" (p. 30).

The deep rooted determination of the men to exclude the women from political representation is clear from **MADU'S** suggestion at the meeting of the male politicians: "well, if they are tired of dancing then let's look for something else for them to do. The whole essence is to distract their attention from power" (p. 31). However, from the position of the playwright, **HAKEEM**, one of the few men who support the women sees it differently as he gives his candid advice in furtherance of the women's course: "If they are tired of dancing, they will soon be tired of your other tricks. The sooner you start to open up the corridors of power to women the better for all of us". Salami-Agunloye thus "fights" to create a significant space for women to operate within the political space and this she achieves when a woman not only emerges as presidential candidate but also president of the nation from the national elections. An analysis of some central characters in the play reveals how the playwright, through a womanist approach, achieves this.

1. **BISI**: is a brave and brilliant political leader; enlightened and resilient. A rightful women leader who knows what is good for her members and goes ahead to pursue it. She stops the dancing women from further dancing and "drives" them away, wakes them from political complacency and sensitizes them to the need to fight for political representation: "I will have none of this. Go back to your homes. For how long must we continue dancing? We must wake up from our complacency ... No more dancing" (p. 2). She is the motivating factor for the women group. She is a woman of strong character who would brood no nonsense from the men. She refuses to be intimidated by the male politicians to desist from further providing the leadership that could emancipate the women in politics. When **MADU** says, "Madam Bisi, just who do you think you are...? Madam Bisi should be called to order." She counters, "The veil covering our faces has been removed... You cannot intimidate us with your yelling anymore" (P. 3). No wonder, other women hail her as "Mama UPLP" and give her their loyalty. She convinces the women to demand for inclusive politics. By this she demands a deconstruction and reconstruction of existing political culture and structures that she considers highly patriarchal. Madam Bisi proves to be a selfless leader, who having goaded the women into political agitation and resolves to present a presidential nominee for the primary election of the party immediately disqualifies herself from being a candidate. (p. 50). Madam Bisi is a political strategist: in spite of various antics and pressure from the men of UPLP to push Alhaji Bawa as the party's presidential candidate she maintains her peace and keeps her game plan close to her chest until she ensures that **NONA**, the women candidate, wins as the president of the nation, albeit through the support of some party men. This proves also that she is truly a womanist.
2. **NONA ODARO**: Like Madam Bisi, Odaro is also a visionary, bold and resilient. She shares the view that "democracy will only be democracy when men and women as equal partners deliberate upon national policies and legislations" (p. 5). She is an intellectual in politics, who is aware that women

are not inferior to men politically. Once chosen by the women as their presidential candidate, she goes ahead to pursue her political goal with deft, demonstrating a high intellectual capacity that is unmatched by many men. Dismissing the ideological ambivalence of some of the women who are torn between political liberation of women and patriarchal subjugation, she insists that their political party, UPLP, "is for all of us, male and female." (p. 7). She holds on to the womanist ideology that it is the combination of women and men acting in concert as political stakeholders that will enhance the political fortune of her nation. Despite her political persecution, like the womanist that she is, she takes everything with equanimity and maturity such that neither her political ambition collapses nor her matrimonial home crumbles. This is one of the strong sides of womanism.

3. **HAKEEM:** This is one of the male characters used by the playwright to consummate her strategy of fighting for women's emancipation in the play. Though a man, he not only stands on the side of the women in their struggle for political reckoning, he also fights on their side to achieve it. While other men like Femi, Sani, Madu and Balat are stoutly against the political ambition and advancement of the women, Hakeem believes in it and emphasises the need for an inclusive politics where both men and women are given equal opportunities.

Conclusion

This paper has examined gender and political participation in *More than Dancing* by Irene Salami-Agunloye. It has been established that while African pre-colonial women had some chance to participate in the political administration of their society, women in the colonial period had little or no such privilege. The paper showed that women such as Lawuwo Gbadiaya, Iyayun, Queen Amina and Queen Kanbasa ascended to the pinnacle of political ladders (Monarchs) in the pre-colonial period in Ife, Oyo, Zazzau, and Bony respectively.

Women in postcolonial Nigeria have, however, been observed to have very little opportunity to participate in the political process, especially when it comes to representation. Although such representations have appreciated over that of the colonial period, the degree at which this has occurred is, however, marginal. For instance, the 26 women elected to positions out of the overall figure of 1,533 elected positions across the country, (President to the State Houses of Assembly), in the 2015 general elections is abysmally low in a nation where the percentage of women population to that of men oscillates between 49.5% and 50% (Federal Bureau of Statistics, 2016 Statistical Report on men and women). This representation is extremely incommensurate with the high participation of women in politics. The analysis of *More than Dancing* also corroborates this. However, Salami-Agunloye's dramaturgy shows a commitment to a womanist approach by seeking cooperation between the two genders for increase in female political participation and representation.

In the author's view, the fact of women's under-representation, if repeatedly made known to the public, could re-shape political behaviour. Hence it is recommended that, Nigerian playwrights should write more about politics, particularly focusing on themes that encourage re-engineering of the nation's political process and increased participation and representation of women in politics. This is the kind of change NONA, demands when she retorts: "if we say we are a free and a democratic party then we must be able to deconstruct and reconstruct our political culture" (p. 4).

References

- Agbalajobi, D.A (2010). "Women's participation and the political process in Nigeria: Problems and prospects". In *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, Vol. 4(2), Pp.075- 082.
- Akande-Adeola, M. (2013). "The politics of accessing leadership: The Nigerian context". Being text of a distinguished annual lecture delivered at the University of Jos, on 11th February, 2013.
- Akpan, N. E. (2015). "Men Without women: An analysis of the 2015 general election in Nigeria." Retrieved from: <http://www.inecnigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/>, Accessed on 26/07/17
- Asen, R. D. (2006). "Womanist Critique of the Socio-cultural Themes in Selected Plays of Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme and J. P. Clark", in Salami-Agunloye, I. (ed.) *Women, Theatre and Politics: Contemporary Perspectives*.
- Ashcroft, B. Griffiths, G. & Tiffin, H. (1998). *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in Postcolonial literatures*. London: Routledge.
- Awofeso, O. and Odeyemi, T.O. (2014). "Gender and political participation in Nigeria: A cultural perspective". In *Journal Research in Peace, Gender and Development (JRPGD)*, Vol. 4(6), Pp. 104-110.
- Barber, K (2000). *The Generation of Plays*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Clark, E. (197). *The Making of Hubert Ogunde*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Dasylyva, A. O. (2017). *Culture Matters: African Literary Traditions, Organic Ontologies and Epistemological Roots*. An inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Ibadan. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Evwierhoma, M. (2015). *Issues in Gender, Drama and Culture*. Lagos: Concept Publications Limited
- Federal Bureau of Statistics, (2016) Statistical Report on men and women
- Idegú, E. U. (2005). *The Legendry Inikpi*. Kaduna: TW Press and Publishers.
- Idowu, T. O. (2014). Sustaining the Glow: A Womanist Peek into the Female Emancipator Attributes in Queen Amina of Zazzau. Retrieved from: <http://asirimagazine.com/en/sustaining-the-glow-a-womanist-peek-into-the-female-emancipatory-attributes-in-queen-amina-of-zazzau-part-1/> on 26/07/17
- Kolawole, M. E. M. (1997). *Womanism and African Consciousness*. New Jersey: Africa World Press Inc.
- Nigerian Centenary Country Report on Women, 2013
- Napikoski (2016). <https://www.thoughtco.com/womanist-feminism-definition-3528993>.
- Nigeria - Population, Female (% of total). Retrieved from: <https://tradingeconomics.com/nigeria/population-female-percent-of-total> on 26/07/17
- Obafemi, O. (2001). Contemporary Nigeria theatre. Ibadan: Craft Books Ltd.
- Ogundipe, M. (2007). *Indigenous and Contemporary Gender Concepts and Issues in Africa: Implications for Nigeria's Development*. Lagos: Malt house Press Limited.
- Ogunyemi, W. (1999). *Queen Amina of Zazzau*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Okoronkwo-Chukwu, U. (2013). "Female Representation in Nigeria: The case of the 2011 General Elections and the Fallacy of 35% Affirmative Action". In *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* ISSN 2222-1719 (Paper) ISSN 2222-2863 (Online) Vol.3, No.2, 2013. Retrieved from: www.iiste.org on 27/07/17
- Olorunmola, A. (2016). "Cost of Politics in Nigeria". Retrieved from: <http://www.wfd.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Nigeria-Cost-of-Politics.pdf> on 26/07/17
- Oloruntoba-Oju, O and Oloruntoba-Oju, T. (2013). "Models in the Construction of Female Identity in Nigerian Postcolonial Literature". *TYDSKRIF VIR LETTERKUNDE* • 50 (2) • 2013 5 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/tvl.v50i2.1>.
- Oluyemi, O. (2015). "Monitoring Participation of Women in Politics in Nigeria". Retrieved from https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/Finland_Oct2016_on_23/04/2017.
- Quadri, M. O. (2015). "Women and Political Participation in the 2015 General Elections: Fault Lines and Mainstreaming Exclusion". Retrieved from <http://www.inecnigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/> on 23/04/17
- Salami-Agunloye, I. I. (2013). *More than Dancing*. Jos: SANIEZ Publications.
- Sofola, Z. (1998). "Feminism and African Womanhood". In O. Nnaemeka's (Ed.) *Sisterhood: Feminisms and power from Africa to the Diaspora*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 51-64. Statistical Report on Women and Men Population in Nigeria. Retrieved from: <http://nigerianstat.gov.ng/download/491> on 01/07/17.
- Udengwu, N. (2015). "Nigerian Female Playwrights on Politics". In T. C. Utoh-Ezeajugh and B. F. Ayakoroma (eds.) *Gender Discourse in African Theatre, Literature and Visual Arts: A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Mabel Evwierhoma*. Ibadan: Kraftbooks Limited.

- Udokang (Snr.) J. C. and Awofeso, O. (2000). Political Ideas: An Introduction. Uyo: MacGrace Publishers.
- Walker, A. (2000). *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*. London: The Women's Press.
- Wollstonecraft, M. (1892). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Retrieved from:

- <https://www.enotes.com/topics/vindication-rights-woman-on-24/07/17>
- Yacim, R. A. (2015). Denystifying Motherism in a Dialectical Discourse: The Example of Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Nneora: An African Doll's House*.